

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will stand in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:31 p.m., recessed until 2:14 p.m.; whereupon, the Senate reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. GREGG).

AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 1999

The Senate continued with the consideration of the bill.

Mr. WELLSTONE addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. WELLSTONE. I thank the Chair.

AMENDMENT NO. 3127

Mr. President, I come before the Senate as a Senator from Minnesota, along with other Senators from the Midwest, although I think that we represent the point of view of Senators throughout the country. I come to speak to the sense-of-the-Senate amendment that is before the Senate, although we are going to have much more business to follow.

The concluding paragraph of the sense-of-the-Senate resolution is:

Now, therefore, it is the sense of the Senate that emergency action by the President and Congress is necessary to respond to the economic hardships facing agricultural producers and their communities.

This was laid down by my colleague, Senator DASCHLE from South Dakota, the minority leader.

I ask unanimous consent that I be included as an original cosponsor of his amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WELLSTONE. Senator HARKIN spoke when I was out on the floor earlier, and Senator DORGAN, and Senator JOHNSON. Senator CONRAD may have spoken.

Mr. President, let me talk not so much about what is happening around the country, although most Senators represent States that are being hurt by this crisis in agriculture. Let me instead talk about what has happened in northwest Minnesota and what is happening right now in my State.

In northwest Minnesota, we have been hit by bad weather. Everybody remembers the floods. We have also been affected by scab disease. And now we are facing very low prices with grain crops.

Mr. President, the situation is dire. Wally Sparby, director of our farm service agency in the State, has predicted that we could lose as many as 20 percent of our farmers, that right now one out of every five farm families is in trouble and is struggling. Thanks to the help of Senators, including the Senator from Mississippi, Senator

COCHRAN, we were able to get some help to farmers for spring planting season. We were able to get USDA farm credit to farmers at planting time. The problem is whether people are going to continue to be able to farm.

Mr. President, I read from the testimony of Rod Nelson, who is president of the First American Bank in Crookston, which also has offices in the communities of Warren, Fisher, and Shelly in northwest Minnesota. Here is the concluding paragraph:

In our bank in the fall of 1995, we began addressing the reality that things had reached a new level of concern, as many rather than some of our farm customers, were not doing well. Things have only gotten worse since then. This year we conservatively project to have 20 growers quitting or significantly downsizing their operation. We likely have an equal number thinking about doing so or in the process of doing so. It's important to note that to properly phase out of farming it takes good planning and 2, 3 or 4 years. The increased number we are seeing this year will likely be even larger next year. These numbers just represent our banks customers. As you look at the whole of Northwestern Minnesota, the picture would be worse because not all areas have beets which has been the one consistently good crop.

Mr. President, I will just translate all of these statistics in personal terms.

I hope we will take action in this Chamber that will make a difference. I hope it will happen in the House. I don't want it to be symbolic politics. I don't want a partisan debate. I hope it doesn't end up going in that direction, because I will tell you, I have met too many people who are now being driven off their farms. They not only work on the farms; this is where they live. During the mid-1980s, I was a teacher at Carleton College in Northfield, in Rice County, some 491 square miles, population I think about 41,000, and most all of my community organizing was in farm, rural areas. I spoke at so many different farm gatherings, and I knew so many families that were foreclosed on. I saw a lot of broken dreams and a lot of broken lives and a lot of broken families. That is exactly the direction we are going in right now.

Farmers have good years and also some not so good years. Prices go up and prices go down. I am not, I say to my colleagues, going to come out here and rail about the Freedom to Farm bill. Maybe there will be a time to do that. I will say in a very quiet way that I really do believe this has been more for the benefit of corporate agribusiness, and I do think now that prices are falling and the so-called transition payments are dwindling, an awful lot of farmers are in trouble. That is the real point.

We no longer have the safety net we once had. Farmers cannot make it on \$2 corn, they can't make it on \$3.25 wheat, and that is why at the beginning I said, and I say it again, I think the Freedom to Farm bill has become the "Freedom to Fail" bill.

Now, after having said that, I want my colleague from Mississippi and

other colleagues to know that I don't see this particular resolution or the amendments that we are going to bring to the floor over the next day or so as being a debate about the Freedom to Farm bill. I think it was a profound mistake. I voted against it. I will always take that position until proven wrong.

By the way, I said when it was passed that I prayed I was wrong. I would be pleased to be proven wrong. If in fact the Freedom to Farm bill, along with the flexibility for farmers in planting, which I am all for, was to lead to family farmers doing better and the families being better off, I would be all for it.

I guess that was the theory. But now we don't have the safety net we had, and, most important of all, farmers do not have the leverage in the marketplace to get a decent price. That is what I would put my focus on, a fair price for farmers, especially family farmers.

Now, for people who might be watching our debate, I think this is special to me as a Midwesterner, because the family farm structure of agriculture is precious to our part of the country. We all know that the land will be farmed by somebody and somebody will own the animals. The question is whether or not the land is farmed by family farmers. The number of family farmers who live in our communities has a lot to do with who supports our schools, who supports our churches or synagogues, who supports the local businesses in town. This is a life-or-death issue for a very important part of America. This is a life-or-death issue for a part of America that is dear to many Americans.

So first we have the resolution that is before us which asks the Senate to recognize that we have an emergency situation, and we do. This would potentially free up some funds that are needed to provide family farms and families in rural America with some support.

Second, I think the most significant thing we can do is to focus on price. When I think about the discussions I have with farmers—I hope to be in Granite Falls, Minnesota this Saturday with State legislators. Doug Peterson is going to be there; Ted Winter is going to be there; Jim Tunheim from northwest Minnesota has been making the plea over and over: Please do something. Our focus will be to lift the current cap on the market loan rate.

Right now, we have a cap on the loan rate which is \$1.89 for a bushel of corn and \$2.58 for a bushel of wheat, and this tends to set a floor under prices. But this is simply too low. It is just simply too low. Farmers cannot cash-flow with these kinds of prices. At a Minnesota average price for the year at \$2 for corn, it simply is not going to work for family farmers.

What I would like to do in the best of all worlds, is to remove these caps and raise the loan rate to the close to the cost of production—\$3 corn and \$4